

Doubt

A Review of *Cloistered: My Life as a Nun* (2023) by Catherine Coldstream

“What I offer is a story. A personal testament. A glimpse over the wall. It is an act of thanks for my survival,” writes the author of *Cloistered*, Catherine Coldstream, who entered a Carmelite monastery in the north of England in 1989 at age twenty-seven and ran away from it in the dark one night ten years later through fields she describes as “black carpets of freedom only bumbily illuminated in places by the moon.” She found her way to her sister’s flat in Newcastle, but didn’t stay long. Having lost her ability to live in a secular world, she returned to the monastery, where she remained for two more years before finally, officially, anti-climactically leaving it for good.

Raised an Anglican, Coldstream—or Sister Catherine, as she was known in her community of twenty or so in pseudonymous Akenside—came from a family of artists and was herself a musician (“a London girl from a bohemian family”). Things seemed to be going okay, but then her beloved father died. He was elderly; his passing was not a surprise. But she felt unusually bereft. Her mother, distant, neglectful, concerned chiefly with her own career, provided no solace. Looking for a family to replace the one she’d lost, and thinking a lot about what comes after death, Coldstream converted to Catholicism and started the process of becoming a cloistered nun for life. The vows she was prepared to take were the typical ones for many Catholic orders: poverty, chastity, and obedience. She knew there would be sacrifices. What she hadn’t planned on was giving up her will. She hadn’t expected to be intellectually starved, either, permitted to speak to the other sisters only about “the weather and the garden,” “meaningful or searching” conversations forbidden.

I read somewhere that everything in the world is about sex except sex, which is about power. Of course denying oneself or others sex is power, too. Power certainly corrupts this celibate community’s leadership, Mother Elizabeth, described by Coldstream conflictingly as “suave and beautiful” but also like a carved-wooden figurehead on “an old-fashioned sailing ship.” This character by whom Coldstream felt spiritually seduced was a passive-aggressive authoritarian, too. One example: The monastery was plagued by feral cats—their fleas, their urine, their slippery poop. But nobody even mentioned the problem until it became a crisis, because Mother Elizabeth was fond of them. (Interestingly, though, the nuns were not allowed to stroke them, due to their renunciation of “luxury’ and sensuality.”)

As a postulant (a first-stage aspirant), Coldstream wore her own clothes. Donning the Carmelite habit as a novice (the second stage) was the first step toward final vow-taking (the third stage). However, no sooner was she wearing the order’s prescribed “dowdy skirt” and “big brown sack that covered everything from neck to the floor” than she began thinking about leaving—or trying not to think about it. From all we hear about dwindling numbers of religious today, one would think the Carmelites would want to keep anybody who was qualified and willing to join them. But over the course of Coldstream’s time at Akenside, one young woman was asked to leave because she had “not sufficiently surrendered”; another was sent packing with no explanation given to the others; a third left after a mental breakdown; and a fourth remained but was heavily medicated. Obviously, Akenside was failing its newest initiates; and so in a rare

moment, the community sat down to discuss the problem, specifically: “What changes might we consider making to adapt to the needs of young women coming in today?”

“I think it’s important that we don’t treat them as children,” Coldstream told her assembled sisters. “My own view is that people coming in today may bring with them not only openness, and readiness to change, but also a spirit of genuine enquiry. They may come to us with a desire to study and learn. Questioning and discussion are part of life nowadays, and most educations will have encouraged both. So I think we should acknowledge that fact, and build on it. I think it’s time to encourage people to use their minds, and to be nourished intellectually, not just told what to do without any sort of genuine human interchange.” Unwittingly or otherwise describing herself and her own dilemma, Coldstream was initially commended for sharing it. But the next day she was told to apologize and take her comments back. Shocked, confused, she did so anyway, lying prostrate on the floor to kiss it, as prescribed by monastery law. She made her escape in the night soon afterwards.

Interrogatory sentences pepper many pages of *Cloistered*—e.g., “Why did [Mother] Elizabeth hate it if you felt too deeply or tried too hard?”—but a questioning person has no business being part of a faith-based organization. Coldstream should never have entered the monastery in the first place—it was a decision made by an immature person afflicted by extended mourning. As for her decision to leave, once she got her emotional bearings, she could not have done otherwise. Coldstream calls the writing of the book a gesture of thanks for her survival.

As much as I’d like to, I haven’t been able to find a similar book written by a nineteenth-century missionary apostate. It would be a relevant counterpoint to the scores of missionary memoirs, autobiographies, epistolary compilations, and hagiographical biographies and memorials I have read over the last five years, none of which has provided me with a frank appraisal of experiences in the field. It’s clear to me now that Harriet Newell, whose 1815 memoir was edited by the Rev. Leonard Woods, and the writers of the books that came after hers were not interested in providing readers with authenticity, let alone anything tinged with doubt about the missionary movement to which they had committed their lives. Their stories were designed to offer inspiration and reinforcement of faith as well as reassurance that donations to the cause were being well spent. To have done otherwise would have jeopardized an enterprise dependent almost entirely on continuous giving by its constituency.

So I read *Cloistered* not only as a kind of poor substitute for what I really craved, but also because, like many people, I relished “a glimpse over the wall.” Previously, the closest I had come to a glimpse was a visit to a cloistered nun at the Monastery of the Blessed Sacrament in Yonkers, New York, in the early 1960s, when I was in seventh or eighth grade. I went with the family of a friend. “Sister Mary” was her aunt. She spoke to us from behind the traditional grille, but she wasn’t as close as, say, incarcerated people are to their visitors. She was seated several yards away. Nor was this shadowy figure alone. Another sister was with her. Perhaps those who met with emissaries from the outside world were required to have a chaperone.

I was left wondering then and now: What good did Sister Mary’s life of prayer do? What good would Coldstream, if she had remained Sister Catherine, have done? (As for Sister Mary, in case you were wondering, she did indeed stay; she was listed as a survivor when Judy’s mother died in 2015 and donations to her monastery, now in Scarsdale, were suggested.) Those who

have read my Author's Note know I once wanted to become a Catholic missionary nun. A cloistered life was not what I had in mind. I wanted to "do" good, not just think about it. But what exactly is "good"? Isn't that question the crux of it? I submit that the answer may depend upon what your definition of God is. "I have no doubt that God was over everything that happened to me, and that he is still over everything that fills me and motivates me and matters in my life," declares Coldstream, who is married now and, after going back to university, has taught theology, philosophy, and ethics. "But how I would define that little word, that tiny, huge, potent enigma, is another matter. I won't even begin to try."